Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behavior

A Review

Chip Smith

By Hilary Evans, M.A. and Robert Bartholomew, Ph.D. Anomalist Books, 2009. 784 pp.

Hilary Evans is a British historian and a prolific author who has written dozens books on subjects ranging from Victorian private life to flying saucers. Robert Bartholomew is an accredited sociologist and a recognized authority on collective behavior whose studies in interpretive anthropology have appeared in numerous journals over the years. Together, the two scholars have produced *Outbreak! The Encyclopedia of Extraordinary Social Behavior*, a wildly entertaining, absurdly ambitious, astutely critical, deceivingly academic and nearly definitive study of the myriad crazes, manias, panics, scares, fads, fashions and other sundry sociogenic phenomena that have made history while eluding historians. Out of the box, *Outbreak!* earns its place alongside such classic studies of mass psychology as Charles Mackay's *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* and Gustav Le Bon's *The Crowd*.

Yet *Outbreak!* isn't likely to capture the attention of history geeks, revisionist or otherwise. To begin with, the pop-packaging is all wrong. The thing is the size of a major city phone book, and it's almost too much fun to be taken seriously. You lug it into the local dive bar and you don't look up until three hours and eight Rolling Rocks later, when the after-work habitués are filing out and the lights are dimmed for nightlife. It's easy to get lost in stories of cat massacres, convent hysterias, phantom aircraft waves, suicide clusters and Millinarist migrations. But captivating though it is as a popular compendium of Ripley-descended pop-esoterica, the intellectual substance of Evans and Bartholomew's enchiridion of sociological Forteana is revealed in the authors' sustained and richly elucidated examination of the nexus where history and culture intersect.

Perhaps by default, historians have traditionally sought to illuminate the past by focusing on documents and sources that readily yield to rational – and often political – interpretation. This is only natural. People prefer tidy stories, linear narratives in which conspicuous sequences, motives and catalysts converge to acuminate events that would otherwise remain shrouded in mystery. The problem, as Evans and Bartholomew emphasize, is that this standard itch-scratching method of historical explication is often ill-suited to the task of explaining episodes of extraordinary social behavior. To understand how and why large groups of people can, seemingly of a sudden, come to be possessed by strange convictions, contrarieties and impulses, it is often necessary to look beneath and beyond the surface. One must take account of extra-rational -- and arguably extra-historical -- cultural forces that shape the perceptions of those who experience events in a particular time and context. Absent such diligence, it is possible to construct a superficially accurate chronology that nevertheless misses everything.

To build on John Brockman's famous concept, *Outbreak!* may thus be read as a kind of "Third Culture" scholarship. But where Brockman's term is applied to literature that seeks to bridge the chasm between science and the humanities, Evans and Bartholomew strive to achieve a similar rapprochement between positivist history and what might be understood as a species of meta-history that draws upon a wide range of disciplines – from literary criticism and hermeneutics to cultural anthropology, sociology, psychology and the sciences -- to mine beneath the superfice of a dominant linear narrative.

“It is not enough,” Evans and Bartholomew write, “to view the behavior per se,”

its context and its perceived meaning are essential to a proper understanding. By adopting this approach, we find that some behaviors which are usually described in terms of individual or group pathology may more properly be attributed to the ways in which members of that particular culture are accustomed to express themselves. Thus, unfamiliar conduct codes and perceptual orientations, covert political resistance, local idioms of adaptation or negotiation, culture- and history-specific forms of deviant social roles – any or all of these may form a cultural setting that differs substantially from that of the investigator who approaches it from his own perspective\.

In other words: bias is a bitch, and context is king.

To illustrate the pitfalls that face the “outside investigator,” Evans and Bartholomew memorably cite standard histories of the Boxer Rebellion, which typically portray the populist *Yi-ho-quan* movement “from the point of view of Western observers, with the emphasis on the siege of European legations and the murder of missionaries.” From such vantage, a chronicle may be constructed in rational form. Yet “to adopt this perspective, or even that of the Chinese government of the day,” as the authors contend, “is to fail utterly to understand the significance of the rising, which was essentially a native event, comprehensible only from a native perspective.” Below the surface of a prevailing narrative myopically centered on enmity, subversion and upheaval, the contextual reality of the Boxer movement, fascinating though it is as an account of “extraordinary social behavior,” remains obscure.

Social delusions assume countless forms of expression, from the terrifying to the banal. The most iconic examples may be found in episodic manias centering on sorcery and witchcraft, or in the recurrence of various conspiracy theories and apocalyptic belief systems. In modern times, delusional thinking has been notoriously manifest in narratives of alien abductions and satanic ritual abuse accusations, and germs of hysteria almost certainly inform public susceptibility to a widening raft of health scares that are typically attributed to elusive environmental and industrial hazards, as extensively documented in the pages of *Outbreak!.* But whether one seeks to explain the emergence of cargo cults or the psychogenesis of Gulf War Syndrome or the ephemeral popularity of the latest diet craze, evidence is likely to be nested in the inchoate hopes and fears of a specific time and culture. To understand how and why irrational beliefs and behaviors take root, the historian is thus wise to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, and to proffer some measure of empathy toward those who may seem foolish or gullible by “outside” standards. “Above all,” Evans and Bartholomew stress, “we must be mindful that we are dealing with human beings living in unique, often highly complex circumstances that do not easily lend themselves to superficial analysis.”

And so, yes; it is possible, while proceeding in good faith and adhering to scrupulous methodology, to miss everything. It's quite easy, in fact. All that’s needed is a fixed point of view, enculturated in the regnant assumptions, biases and taboos of the zeitgeist. As the events chronicled in *Outbreak!* make abundantly clear, historians have blind spots, and experts are not immune to self-deception. When the universe of possibilities is scaled to conform to a set of social or moral precepts – or conceits – one simply focuses on the path in view, follows the logic step by step, and veers confidently astray.

The Children's Crusades may never have happened at all, but the resonance of the story still provides insight into the aspirations and fears that defined a period of cultural transformation. And although Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an undisputed master of literary deduction, was deceived by the Cottingly Fairies, it

would surely be obtuse to excuse his lapse as an instance of mere embarrassment. After all, Doyle was a man of his time – a time during which the public fascination with spiritualism and the uncanny held reign. His notorious dalliance with what might be called “the fairy question” is better understood as an expression of the hope-imbued spirit of an era now forgotten. There are reasons for everything.

Of course, if we accept that it is possible to miss everything, it is interesting to speculate about what Evans and Bartholomew may have missed. Though the authors of *Outbreak!* justifiably boast of the “diversity and … obscurity” of their source material, one highly relevant source is conspicuous by its absence.

“Rumors,” according to Evans and Bartholomew, “are essential components of mass scares and hysterias.”

While rumors do not always precede panics, they almost always follow them. Rumors take root in the fertile soil of plausible, ambiguous situations of perceived importance as people unconsciously construct stories in an attempt to gain certainty and reduce fear and anxiety\.

And:

Rumors are common under the stress, uncertainty and anxiety of wartime\.

In *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes*, Samuel Crowell writes:

…the world that rumor describes is itself the expression an inner world of unspoken assumptions, associations, and projections that characterize a human culture at a specific historical moment\.

Poison gas panics are extensively documented in the pages of *Outbreak!* “During the 20th century” Evans and Bartholomew note, “strange odors were the most common trigger of epidemic hysteria in both job and school settings.” They identify gassing elements in the context of numerous terrorism scares spanning decades, and they devote considerable discussion to several episodes of gassing hysteria that took root in the United States preceding and during the Second World War, largely in the context of what popular periodicals of the time referred to as “the poison gas peril.”

In *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes*, Samuel Crowell writes:

[P]oison gases are well suited to paranoid and hysterical reactions, because by definition the substances tend towards the impalpable\.

The most notorious episode may be Orson Welles' 1938 Halloween radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, which caused some since-exaggerated waves of panic across the United States, with many listeners, convinced that a real Martian -- or German -- invasion was under way, making frantic reports of gas attacks to emergency dispatchers. “The Martian invasion scare,” Evans and Bartholomew note, “reflected the preoccupation with poison gas … in a survey of listeners who were frightened, 20% assumed that the Martian ‘gas raids’ were in fact German gas raids on the United States.”

During the intra-war period, a spate of "mad gasser" panics were documented in the American heartland. The most studied episode occurred in Mattoon, Illinois, during the fall of 1944, when reports of a "phantom anesthetist" prowling through suburban neighborhoods received national press coverage, fomenting hysteria. Again, Evans and Bartholomew interpret such episodes as projected expressions of collective anxiety generated through rumors of immanent German gas attacks. The

specter of a mad gasser served to personify the potent fear that German commanders, facing defeat, "might resort to gas warfare."

In noting the testimony of one delusional Mattoon "witness" who claimed that the elusive gasser wore a "skullcap," Bartholomew and Evans interject a curious footnote:

The skullcap implies that he was Jewish, possibly reflecting rural mid-western anti-Semitism of the time where Judaism was often associated with the "evils" of secularism of big city life. Ironically, during this same period, millions of Jews were gassed to death in Europe\.

Ironically, indeed.

One frankly wonders what Evans and Bartholomew might have to say about Samuel Crowell's singular thesis, exposited the *Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes*. Alas, if the existence of Crowell's monograph came to their attention, they keep it to themselves.

Crowell notes that gassing panics played a role on the battlefield as well -- at Omaha Beach for example, where entrenched American soldiers mistook a brush fire for "a cloud of poison." While the soldiers' fear was surely justified, it was likewise symptomatic of the general atmosphere of gas-fixated paranoia that in truth dated to the turn of the century, leaving a culture "primed for accusations of poison gas usage." Mining the deep cultural and literary moorings of the poison gas motif in the Western imagination, Crowell analyses the earliest rumors of Nazi gassings, and makes a very strong case that

since the gassing claims were able to evolve and develop independent of any reliable material or documentary evidence, and indeed were able to evolve to a high degree even before the war began, the gassing claim should be recognized as a delusion, indeed, as one of the greatest delusions of all time\.

If Crowell is correct, the apocalyptic specter of millions being led to slaughter in Nazi gas chambers will come to be understood as a popular delusion on par with the great witch manias to which Evans and Bartholomew assign prominence of place. But the gassing-extermination narrative at the center of Holocaust historiography is currently withheld from consideration as an instance of collective delusion. Whether their omission is deliberate or innocent, the authors' blindness remains instructive. Like the Western historians of the Boxer Rising or like the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Evans and Bartholomew reveal themselves as men of their time, men who are capable, like all of us, of missing everything.

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